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## WITHIN THE QUAKIES

by

Courtney Bulsiewicz

1.

So much space separates me from the mountains. They seem to hold a different world I know nothing about even though I have visited them more times than I can count. In the midst of them, the vastness is overwhelming. When there, I see the quaking aspen surround me: tall, white, freckled, and scarred monuments hiding their worshippers—the bull and buck that had knelt in front of them, rubbing antlers. I can see squirrels running, or maybe chipmunks. I see hawks—my dad collected their molted feathers, and I still have one kept in a box with some of his old pens and trinkets. But there is so much I don't see: how many deer, elk, wolves, bear, moose, beavers, and coyotes are out there. At times, it seems like none; it's so quiet and unmoving.

2.

On a summer afternoon fourteen or fifteen years ago I looked out the back door window of our house and saw my dad on a white plastic lawn chair. His back was toward me and I saw smoke rising from his head, his right arm moving to the armrest, his fingers flicking the ash from a cigarette. I didn't know he smoked. I had

never seen him smoke before. Maybe he was just experimenting like some of my friends were then. I think I just turned away confused until later when I asked him about it, and he told me not to worry. I remember him saying it was just a one-time thing, and that he was really stressed. He told me he wouldn't do it again when he saw my concerned look. But I don't think the look I gave was concern or disappointment, I think I was beginning to realize my dad existed outside my frame of reference. There were parts of him I didn't know anything about; parts of him I would never be able to know or understand. There are things I couldn't see. Things I wanted to know about but couldn't grasp like what was on his mind that summer day? Bigger questions like how he felt about his service to his country in war, whether he missed the Army now that he worked for the city. Things I want to know now, but can't since I never asked and he isn't here. So much separates us.

3.

The sky is pewter. Snow has begun to salt the mountaintops. It's calm around me down here in the valley and it looks calm up there. Just perception—perhaps the wind is blowing so hard and the snow so piercing that the moose don't even have the strength to walk against it. Maybe they hover in their homes, the cow covering her young. I wonder at the other side of the mountain. Is it as black as it seems to me, where all the inhabitants—not just the bears—have gone under ground, into caves, silencing everything, or is there just as much life, hidden from those who don't live it; foxes jumping into snow banks trying to find rodents, mountain goats pushing up through the dark blizzard.

4.

When I would hunt with my father it took patience to see our prey. We went hours, sometimes days without seeing any movement at all except the sway of the quakies and their silvery leaves. I was secretly happy when his barrel found no aim. But then torn when I saw his heavy shoulders. We needed this hunt; struggling through bills, this would provide food for the year.

While hiking with him I wondered where the animals went when we couldn't see them—did they see us? Sometimes I would imagine the deer or elk with their family, safe in a hiding place we would never find, watching us search for them, laughing at our blindness. But I am sure they weren't laughing; maybe they were crying instead, or maybe just holding their breaths. I cried for them too. I refused to eat their meat, and asked my father to hang their open bodies behind our tent so I could walk out of the zippered door and not see the life we had taken from the world we were invading.

Though we went into the mountains several times a year, and though it felt like home, and though I wanted it to be home, it still felt like a foreign land. We came up from our comfortable homes with grocery stores two blocks away and tried to take part in a world we had separated ourselves from. Then we encompassed it like we owned it, forcing other animals to hide in a world in which they belonged so completely. Maybe I would feel differently if we entered the mountains more than seven to 10 days total out of 365. It wasn't our territory.

My father always argued with me at dinner to eat what he had worked so hard to put on the table, but he didn't argue with me

about the carcass, hanging it hidden in the trees so I wouldn't have to see. I can't help but wonder if it was difficult for him as well: holding a rifle against a living thing. A war veteran couldn't have taken death lightly.

5.

I think my dad loved the mountains more than anything else in life. He taught me to love them too, and I do, probably because I love him. I wanted to know him. He became a different man up there, happier, funnier, more peaceful. He was able to sleep in past four in the morning, not having to get up to go to work before the sun came up. He was able to be present with his family, not having to work two jobs to pay the overdue bills. It was just our family and the wild that surrounded us. His eyes were clearer, not shadowed. His voice was lighter, more apt to a laugh than a yell. It was one of the main reasons I went on the hunt—it was one of the longest stretches of time I got to spend with my father.

6.

One year it took us a whole day to find a deer my father had wounded. My dad was sick; he couldn't bear the thought of the animal suffering. He barely said anything except initial direction as to where to look and then exhausted sighs. His hands came up to his face and buried it several times. His eyebrows reflected his worry and reversed their arch to almost meet in the middle, forming horizontal lines above the bridge of his nose. I don't know how many miles we covered that day, but the birds were out when my father shot the buck and the crickets when we finally found him. The deer was sitting there, waiting; his eyes—I can still see them—glossy, wide, helpless, my father was heartbroken and

seemed to run to him, relieving him of the pain quickly, barely taking the time to tell my sister and me to turn away.

7.

When I was young, too young to know better, I asked my father if he ever killed someone in war. The moment I asked it, I regretted it. His face went blank with wide eyes and a straight mouth, slightly opened by anger and pain. I don't think I ever hurt him as badly as I did in that moment. I felt like I wasn't his daughter.

8.

I want to go to the mountain, and make myself invisible. Just lie there. Feel closer to my father. I want to go to him and wait, and listen, and see—watch the world that confounds me open up. I wish I had the capabilities of a movie camera. A strong lens that would carry me through the pockets of trees undetected. Zooming in and seeing the peace and safety that might exist in a deer during a storm in late November, when the hunt is over and no man is out there. But maybe there is never peace, always some villain. Maybe instead of an outsider it's the wolf haunting the very place he calls home. The mountain holding so much war.

10.

I still feel comfort in the mountains, like I am folded up under my father's arms. The pine, sage, wildflower, and woods of the wild that smell like his musk cologne I keep in my closet. But I feel so separate, knowing there are mysteries I can never comprehend. When I visit, I settle the ground a bit, make my place, but I will never be able to encompass it fully, understand its breadth, inhabitants, storms, decay, life, its death from others' hands, its death from its own.